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**Arson Ruled Out in Lawrence Conflagration**

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan, Lawrence Fire Chief Peter C. Takvorian, Lawrence Police Chief John J. Romero and Special Agent in Charge Glenn N. Anderson of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives announced that their joint investigation into the January 21, 2008 conflagration has concluded.

Coan said, "There is no information to suggest nor evidence to indicate the fire was intentionally set or the result of a criminal act. However, due to the tremendous level of destruction in the building of origin and the damage caused by the building's collapse, investigators were unable to recover enough evidence to point to one specific accidental cause thereby eliminating all others. Therefore the cause will remain officially undetermined at this time."

Chief Takvorian said, "A dozen investigators considered and examined several possible ignition sources including: an electrical malfunction, the mechanical breakdown of a gas-fired furnace, the misuse of portable un-vented heaters, a natural gas rupture within the building as well as the possibility of an intentionally-set fire."

Chief Romero said, "I want to commend the members of the Lawrence Arson Task – the Lawrence Fire Department, the Lawrence Police Department, the state police assigned to the Office of the State Fire Marshal, the agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, and staff in the District Attorneys office for the many hours and long days of hard work they put into this investigation. They worked tirelessly and seamlessly to explore all possible leads."

From interviews with witnesses and first in firefighters, the investigators have determined that the fire originated in 44 Parker Street, a 3-story wood frame building that had been undergoing renovations. Without interior fire stops and with natural gas fueling the fire for an extended period of time, the fire rapidly engulfed the building. The heat and flying

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embers from this original fire building led to the destruction of 13 other buildings. The 7-alarm fire displaced 200 people and caused an estimated \$4 million in damage.

In Massachusetts, fire investigators use a witness-driven protocol combined with a forensic examination of the fire scene to determine fire causes. They work to systematically eliminate all possible ignition scenarios at the area or point of origin until they are left with a single most probable cause. Investigators interviewed and re-interviewed dozens of people in connection with this fire including people familiar with the building such as the owners, contractors, subcontractors, building officials, as well as firefighters and other witnesses.

Investigators spent several days combing through 44 Parker Street looking for any evidence the fire scene could provide, despite the fact that it was clear from early on that it would provide little assistance in determining the cause due to the extent of the destruction.

Investigators did find the remains of two heaters and two propane tanks in the debris inside the foundation at 44 Parker Street despite a building inspector's order to remove them from the job site on Friday, January 18, 2008. However, the heaters were only one of several possible ignition sources identified by investigators. They cannot rule out electrical failure or malfunction, a natural gas system failure, or a mechanical malfunction of the gas-fueled furnace.

The fire was investigated by the Lawrence Fire Investigation Task Force, which has remained in effect since the early 1990s. Members of the task force include: investigators with the Lawrence Fire Department, detectives from the Lawrence Police Department, state police assigned to the Office of the State Fire Marshal, and agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). The Essex District Attorney's Office also assisted and guided facets of the investigation.

### **340 Fires in Vacant Buildings in 2006**

According to the Massachusetts Fire Incident Reporting System (MFIRS), in 2006, 340 building fires occurred in buildings that were vacant, under construction or demolition. These 340 fires caused three civilian injuries, 50 firefighter injuries and an estimated \$14.6 million in damages. The average dollar loss per vacant building fire was \$42,932.